

# FAMILY:

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explode in a cacophony of dysfunction in *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, the judge's choice for best dramatic film. While this incisive black comedy reflected a director/screenwriter (Todd Solondz) who understands everything that can be awful about being in junior high school, this film is painful to watch.

Heather Matarazzo is superb as Dawn Wiener, the middle-child in middle school in the middle of New Jersey. Not only is she the ultimate scapegoat at school, she is an under-loved daughter wedged between an exceptionally talented — if slightly nerdish — college-bound brother and a fairy princess younger sister.

Although there is nothing to cheer about when a friendless child is called "wiener dog" and worse, the real discomfort comes in her relationship with her own family. A powerless father does nothing to help a daughter whose own mother treats her as if her child were Cinderella and she the wicked stepmother. The ideal of home as a sanctuary is upended as Dawn must maneuver the land

mines of unacceptance, criticism and indifference.

The bleakness of a film message that says "Life will get better because, while nobody will like you, at least they won't insult you to your face," is underscored by a family that shows its own contempt for one of its own.

In a fantasy scene, Dawn dreams she finds her kidnaped sister in the streets of New York. Everyone rushes to Dawn to say they love her. Her mother, in particular, shows deep affection for her daughter, but alas, the warmth of a loving family is found only in a mirage.

If Dawn Wiener is going to succeed in an askew world where she fits in neither at home nor school, she is going to have to be resilient against the forces that label her as a loser.

In a world where U.S. politicians peg society ills as a lack of family values and use the movies as a reflection of that deficiency, it is heartening to see a film where family and values can be found in the most unlikely places, typified in *Care of the Spitfire Grill*. It's too bad Dawn Wiener could not find love with Hannah, Shelby and Percy.

